

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE CHURCH  
5472 South Kimbark Avenue  
Chicago  
Cook County  
Illinois

HABS IL-326  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
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ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE CHURCH

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Location: 5472 South Kimbark Avenue, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois

Significance: Built in 1922, Barry Byrne's radical design for St. Thomas the Apostle Church stands as an early Modernist Roman Catholic church design in the United States. In breaking from the conventions of sacred architecture, the plan of the church predates the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council by forty years.

Description: Drawing on the precepts of the Prairie School, St. Thomas the Apostle Church is composed in warm earth colors and is sensitively attuned to its site. The massing of the building is monumental while retaining a human scale in its details. Paired lancet windows joined by sculptural niches bridge traditional church forms to modernist design. The corners of the building are executed in successive setbacks of brick which draw attention to the effusive terra cotta cornice. The broad, uninterrupted expanse of the sanctuary, however, is the most important characteristic of the church, and reconfigures the spatial as well as liturgical relationship between celebrant and congregation.

History: St. Thomas the Apostle parish was established in 1869 in what would become the Hyde Park neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Barry Byrne was an architect who had worked in Frank Lloyd Wright's Oak Park Studio and had served as construction architect for Wright's Unity Temple. He made the acquaintance of Father Thomas Vincent Shannon. Over the course of the early 1920s, Father Shannon contracted Byrne to design several buildings, including Immaculata High School and an accompanying convent for the order of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The fifth of Byrne's five commissions for Father Shannon was a church for St. Thomas the Apostle parish to replace the original church building that stood on the southeast corner of 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Kimbark Avenue.

In his design for the church, Byrne intended to create a hall that brought members of the congregation close to the celebrant of the Mass. Byrne collaborated with Alfonso Ianelli, a sculptor who had worked on previous projects for the Frank Lloyd Wright studio, to design the exterior terra cotta ornament. Another prominent artisan sculptor, Edgar Miller, designed the finials on the cornice.

For reasons that remain unclear, Byrne was fired from the project prior to its completion. Robert Kane oversaw the final stages of construction, following Byrne's original drawings. Kane designed the portal, and in 1926, added the rectory wing situated perpendicular to the church.

St. Thomas the Apostle Church was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

Sources:

George A. Lane, S.J., *Chicago Churches and Synagogues: An Architectural Pilgrimage*.  
Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1981.

Vincent L. Michael, Ph.D., personal communication with author.

Historian: Lisa Napoles